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## ARTICLE

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# Idiosyncrasy as Strategy in the Age of Epistemic Violence

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## Abstract

One of the first principles of capitalism is, undeniably, instrumentalisation; the subjection of one thing to another with the speculative aim of producing some future 'value', regardless of how dubious – or even noxious this 'value' may be. In the knowledge economy, which produces value from accelerated innovation (also interpretable as the *overproduction* of the minimally different) value is extracted in two chief ways: via the misplaced rhetoric of excellence, and via netocratic quantification. Both of these processes are further aggravated by the additive nature of the digital media (Han); the irrationality of rationality (Ritzer); and attention deficit. Despite the fact that knowledge in general, and artistic knowledge in particular, is heterogeneous as well as, essentially, undecidable, in this essay I argue for a specific brand of knowledge: idiosyncratic, and, if need be, incomprehensible. Not as a weak 'I would rather not' strategy of resistance – to borrow from Herman Melville's over-exploited, half-dead anti-hero Bartleby – but as an antidote to reductionism, information deluge, and their increasing neurological consequences, such as Information Fatigue Syndrome.

## Keywords

undecidability, epistemic legitimation, cognitive violence, the figure of the idiot

## La idiosincrasia como estrategia en la era de la Violencia Epistémica

### Resumen

Uno de los primeros principios del capitalismo es, indudablemente, la instrumentalización, la sujeción de una cosa a otra con el objetivo especulativo de producir algún «valor» futuro, independientemente de lo dudoso o incluso nocivo que pueda ser ese «valor». En la economía del conocimiento, que produce valor a partir de la innovación acelerada (también interpretable como la sobreproducción de lo mínimamente diferente), el valor se extrae de dos formas principales: a través de la inapropiada retórica de la excelencia y de la cuantificación netocrática. Ambos procesos se ven agravados además por la naturaleza aditiva de los medios digitales (Han), por la irracionalidad de la racionalidad (Ritzer) y por el déficit de atención. A pesar de que el conocimiento, en general, y el conocimiento artístico, en particular, es heterogéneo, además de básicamente indeterminable, en este ensayo abogo por un tipo específico de conocimiento: una producción idiosincrática, y, si es preciso, incomprensible. No como una débil estrategia de resistencia tipo «preferiría no hacerlo» tomada del antihéroe sobreexplotado y medio muerto de Herman Melville, *Bartleby*, sino como un antídoto frente al reduccionismo, a la inundación de información y a sus crecientes consecuencias neurológicas, como el síndrome de fatiga informativa.

### Palabras clave

inteterminabilidad, legitimación epistémica, violencia cognitiva, la figura del idiota

## Mediated Immediacy

In Zen Buddhism, there are two ways of entering what is usually referred to as the state of ultimate knowledge: via principle and via practice. Entrance into knowledge via principle is called subitism. It refers to sudden, unmediated understanding. Entrance into knowledge via practice is called gradualism and refers to gradual, mediated understanding. The two forms of knowledge are not mutually exclusive, however. On the contrary, they are interdependent. Their interdependence is explained by the parallel existence of two truths: the ultimate and the conventional. The ultimate truth collapses the difference between the so-called 'everyday' and 'ultimate' knowledge. It claims that 'even though we make fine distinctions between shallow and profound [...] the provisional and the ultimate are universally coextensive' (Faure, 1991, p. 33). Conventional truth, on the other hand, makes a clear difference between 'the metaphorical structure of subitism' and the 'metonymic structure of gradualism' (p. 32). It claims that ascension to ultimate knowledge cannot occur without a clear method and a sustained practice. The two truths, and the two forms of knowledge, operate somewhat like Rubin's vase. Created in 1915 by Danish psychologist Edgar Rubin, the ambiguous image of a vase, which is simultaneously an image of two human profiles facing each other, presents the viewer with two undecidable shape interpretations. Both are consistent with the retinal image but only one interpretation can be maintained at any given time. Despite the fact that we *know* that there are two images we can only see one at a

time. At the same time, however, we know that the 'two' images are, in fact, the foreground and the background of a single image, which creates the illusion of two different images. In Zen, the two truths oscillate in similar fashion, simultaneously collapsing and upholding the hierarchies of knowledge. In the pages that follow, I examine the oscillation of two (seemingly) different approaches to artistic research, as embedded in the wider context of cognitive-capitalist knowledge production, which consists of the exploitative value extraction via the misplaced rhetoric of excellence and of netocratic quantification. As both processes are aggravated by the additive nature of the digital media (Han), the McDonaldised irrationality of rationality (Ritzer), and the growing attention deficit, all of which reduce knowledge to increasingly simpler bytes of information to be consumed with less and less effort, I argue for an idiosyncratic, and, if need be, entirely incomprehensible brand of knowledge as the only possible exit strategy from the enclosure that cognitive capitalism has created.

## Mediated Immediacy in the Artistic and Cultural Realms

Art has traditionally both established and demolished norms and epistemic territories, albeit mostly in consecutive, rather than in simultaneous ways. Throughout history, it has variously performed mimetic, religious, cathartic, philosophical, political, activist, and

ecological functions. It has both 'spoken' from a number of fixed media – architecture, sculpture, painting, music, dance, theatre, film – and created cross-disciplinary approaches to knowledge production. Among the many examples are Joseph Beuys's social sculpture, in which the social is both the site and the medium of production, Nam June Paik and Takako Saito's intermedial work that embroils sensorial compartmentalisations, the telematic work of Paul Sermon, or the more recent projects of etoy and SymbioticA, where activism meets astrophysics, and where design meets the bio-engineering of semi-living organisms, respectively.

In recent decades, more precisely since the European, UK and US universities started introducing art degrees into their undergraduate and postgraduate curricula, in the late 1970s and 1980s, there has been a problem of the ruling view. Is art a discipline – or an agglomeration of disciplines – that grants a method-less, subitist entrance into knowledge by creating uniqueness vis-à-vis multiplicity? Or, is art a discipline like any other that offers a mediated entrance into knowledge by way of a cumulative method comparable to the above-mentioned gradualist approach? Christopher Frayling (1993) was the first to map out artistic epistemic practices as a relationship between searching and result. Apart from historical and theoretical research into artistic practices – traditionally carried out by specialists who are themselves *not* art practitioners – Frayling proposed a differentiation between two categories. The first is research *through* art and design, in which the artist's idiosyncratic explorations are the *only* form of research, and where the artwork is the only result. The second is research *for* art and design, which requires an explicit, non-idiosyncratic method that relies on contextual, historical, and theoretical clarification, in addition to reflection on action, which, as Donald Schön (1984) has argued, lies at the core of all reflective practice, be it art, design, engineering, or the medical sciences.

The latter category – research *for* art and design – was further elaborated by Chris Rust (2007) who suggested that artistic research should, first, define the subject of enquiry as well as explain the researcher's motivation; second, demonstrate an understanding of the context of the investigation; third, use a clear methodology; and, fourth, articulate the premises of the work in a transparent way (2007, p. 75). Rust's emphasis is, of course, on the difference between *exploration* – as a general, open-ended process that does not necessarily follow a particular method – and research that utilises a clear as well, importantly, epistemically ratified methodology, both as an operational tool for gathering and processing data, and as a rationale for its own existence. Although exploration is an integral part of all research, regardless of discipline or medium, accountable research is quite different; it is a teleological effort at legitimising knowledge, which, as Edward Said (2000) has noted in reference to Michel Foucault's comprehensive work in this area, seeks to establish a hegemonic relation between 'order', 'authority' and 'the regulatory power of knowledge' (2000, p. 239).

It goes without saying that there can be no 'either-or' separation of the different practices in artistic research, in production and reception alike, much like there can be no separation of the different species of knowledge – the sudden and the gradual, the ultimate and the conventional. Important to note when discussing subitism and gradualism is the fact that, in monastic orders, sudden ascension to knowledge is regularly *followed* by sustained practice while it can never be proven with a 100 % certainty that a practitioner's epistemic breakthrough was not produced by an entirely random occurrence, *despite*, rather than *because of* their sustained practice and meditation.

After all, the difference between the supposedly 'unmediated', idiosyncratic, and the 'mediated', transparent knowledge, or the difference between the metaphoric and the metonymic structure of knowledge, is cultural, one could even say macrobiotic. It is also political. Many regions with a predominantly Catholic heritage use what may be described as 'direct communication'. In the case of food, this may refer to appreciating the host's delicious cooking by eating a lot, smacking one's lips, licking one's fingers, grunting, and generally producing onomatopoeic sounds of gustatory gratification. In the case of a medical examination, it may refer to the medical professional's embodied care, evident in the way they handle the patient, rather than in what they say – a reassuring sentence that 'declares' care. But the condition of possibility of such 'direct' gestural, vocal, tactile, or other sensorial communication – as opposed to its verbal variant – comes from the heritage of *mediation* in the form of confession and the figure of the priest, the historical mediator between the believer and her god. A comprehensive discussion of the differences between Catholicism and Protestantism is beyond the scope of this essay, however, suffice it to say that the chief difference between the two lies in (the concept and practice of) mediation.

In Catholicism, which relies on the notion of salvation via the church, the pope is regarded as the infallible stand-in for Jesus, saints are prayed to, and the authority to interpret the Bible is placed with the church alone. In Protestantism, by contrast, where salvation occurs via divine grace, there is no head of the church, as it is thought that no one can head the church but Jesus, saints are acknowledged but not prayed to, and every believer has the authority to interpret the Bible, precisely because there is no mediation between the believer and her god (MacCulloch 2003, p. 2-4). Over the centuries, this has sedimented as a social ethic (Arruñada 2010, p. 891), and is the reason why, in many predominantly Protestant regions, much importance is attached to the clarity of (verbal) communication. As there is no mediator, the believer is responsible for making herself transparent to her god, and this 'transparency' is present in all spheres of life. In the Netherlands, it is customary to answer the phone – landline as well as the mobile phone – by clearly announcing one's name so that the caller knows right away whom they are talking to, regardless of the fact that it will, most likely, be Jan who answers Jan's mobile

phone, not Dirk, or Harry. Likewise, it is customary to indicate that one is following one's interlocutor's drift by adding 'is duidelijk', which means 'it is clear', to the more usual forms of affirmation, such as nodding.<sup>1</sup> However, such transparency operates with an internalised norm, which presupposes a degree of uniformity, and depends on *prior mediation*.

A similar difference between 'immediacy' and 'mediated-ness' is present in views on artistic research. For the most part, it is the countries with a Catholic heritage that promote the model of art as epistemic advancement *in and of its own right*, as even a cursory glance at the Italian and French (university) art departments will reveal. In countries like Denmark, England, the Netherlands, and Norway it is often the explanatory, 'reflection on action' model that is favoured, although this is by no means a fast rule, nor is this the only reason for the difference between the two approaches. The other reason is political. Since the 1960s artists have increasingly taken all segments of art production – curating, theorising, organisation, selling and distribution – into their own hands, mostly as a form of protest against mediation by the 'ratified' epistemic or commercial echelons – the curator, the theorist, the critic – who have traditionally conferred worth, relevance, and status on a work of art. Examples here vary from the 1960s' Fluxus artists' appropriation of non-establishment venues, the street and the artist's home, and the use of such distribution systems as Fluxshops and Mail Order Centers,<sup>2</sup> to the Young British Art's 1990s DIY-ism that saw artists like Damien Hirst, Tracey Emin, and Rachael Whiteread organising warehouse shows and writing about their work. Aside from these emancipatory gestures, there are also many other good reasons for working with the idiosyncratic, non-discursive method on the one hand, and the transparent, discursive method on the other, as can be seen from a comparative glance at Paul McCarthy's and Joe Davis's work.

Both artists have worked in the 'in-between' zones of human knowledge, conventionally labelled 'culture' and 'nature', for four decades. McCarthy's scatological work, ranging from his 1970s sexually explicit performances, in which he stuffed raw meat into his mouth and filled his underwear with ketchup and butter, such as in his 1974 *Hot Dog* where he shaved his body, placed his penis into a hotdog bun, bound gauze around his head while retching and vomiting, to the more recent sculptural work like 2009 *White Snow* in which the seven dwarves are depicted as sexually grotesque creatures, with flaccid dangling phallus-like noses, erect penises, and disfigured bodies, or, indeed, caricatures of George W. Bush mechanically sodomising pigs, and the 2013 *Complex Pile* – huge inflatable excrement dropped on Hong Kong. All these works very obviously desecrate culturally sanctified systems of knowledge production.

Joe Davis, on the other hand, a decade-long collaborator of the MIT Lab and the Harvard Medical Lab, creates projects with the DNA programming languages in which poetic texts and graphics are inserted into living organisms; projects that transmit the gene for the most abundant protein on Earth to three sun-like stars, such as his 2009 *Rubisco Stars*; or works in which silkworms are genetically modified to produce transgenic silks biomineralised with metallic gold. Having designed such gadgets as the *Bacterial Radio* for which he received Ars Electronica's Golden Nica in 2012, Davis's work also investigates the genetics of serendipity in mice using mouse-driven mechanical dice-throwing apparatus. Many of Davis's works are meticulously documented; alongside a scientific exposé, they comprise a methodological account, as can be seen from his most recent paper that describes a symbiotic-like, biologically driven regenerating fabric, co-published with a number of scientists under the eponymous title in *Scientific Reports* in 2017. Offering a clear and much-needed methodological account of bacterial strains and growth conditions, fabrics, microscopy, image and bioinformatic analysis, gene design, and the various tearing experiments, the article is a point of entry into what would, without an explanation, seem like pure magic.

For all its un-mediated-ness, however, McCarthy's work follows a clear medial development from performance to object-hood, characteristic of what has, since the 1960s, been referred to as contemporary art. It also operates in a clearly defined symbolic arena, identified by anthropologists, such as Mary Douglas (2002), as a site where 'ideas about separation [...] demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose a system on an inherently untidy experience' and where 'it is only by exaggerating the difference between within and without [...] with and against, that a semblance or order is created' (2002, p. 4). Despite the fact that McCarthy himself offers no more than anecdotal accounts of his work, alongside an occasional correction of the persisting, but, in fact, ungrounded comparison with the Viennese Actionists, and despite the fact that he works very much within the 'research *through* art' idiom, his work, viewed in continuity over four decades, is transparent and accessible. It also has recognised epistemic value.<sup>3</sup>

Davis's work, on the other hand, retains a touch of the inexplicable and the profoundly mysterious despite the manifold and thorough explanations. The epistemic surplus here remains unsubsumable under any discursive strategy, cross- or post-disciplinary exegesis. The work is always more, *much* more than its rationale, exegesis, or appendices. And yet, this 'more' can be neither qualified nor quantified. When compared, McCarthy and Davis's approaches, either to a single work, or to their entire oeuvre, remain irreducible to the 'through' and

1. For a more in-depth discussion of the specifically Dutch brand of Calvinist transparency see Lushetich (2014a).

2. For a comprehensive discussion of Fluxshops and Mail Order Centers see Lushetich, N. (2014b).

3. For more information, see Jones (2000) and Ruggoff, (1996).



'for' paradigm of artistic research. Undecidably, they both collapse and uphold the hierarchies (as well as the practices) of knowledge.

## Why Knowledge Can no Longer be Undecidable

In the current historical moment, however, stating that knowledge is, ultimately, undecidable – which it certainly is – is both utopistic and problematic. In cognitive capitalism, which works at 'capturing, within a generalized social activity, the innovative elements that produce value' (Negri and Vercellone 2008, p. 44), there is an increasing pressure on artists to discursivise their work in keeping with the *ratified* epistemic methodologies, with only a small margin for variation – the occasional insertion of a 'poetic' voice into a prevalently discursive style, for example. This pressure is the pressure of value extraction, part of the vertiginous process of epistemic commodification, related to two sets of problems. The first set comprises the commonplaces of capitalism: the fetishisation of the mode of production, accumulation, and, more recently, the extraction of value via the rhetoric of excellence, and netocratic quantification. The second is far more serious. It concerns the *generative power* of the above processes as related to the additive nature of the digital media, the irrationality of rationality, and the growing attention deficit.

Let me begin with the first set first. The fetishisation of methodology – as a smoothly operating epistemic mode of production – was debunked decades ago by such figures as Jacques Derrida, Bruno Latour, and Steve Woolgar. Discussing Plato's *Phaedrus* in 'Plato's Pharmacy' and referring to Plato's ruminations on Socrates's uncertainty about the merits of writing, Derrida (1981) shows that Socrates, widely considered as *the* founder of Western philosophy, debates the merits of writing in relation to *mythology*, not to philosophy. What is presented as a rational argument is shown to be dependent on myth – the realm of fables, not logical reasoning (1981, p. 125-127). In similar fashion, in *Laboratory Life*, Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar (1979) show that the practice of science 'widely regarded by outsiders as well organized, logical and coherent, in fact consists of a disordered array of observations with which scientists struggle to produce order' (1979, p. 36). Laboratory life is here shown to be a chaotic mixture of social, political, and technical factors, the divide between which is instituted *a posteriori*, in the form of scientific writing. In this day and age, the pitfalls of methodological fetishisation are, in most papers and doctoral dissertations, acknowledged by way of the obligatory rumination on the limits of the methodology/ies used, after which one often proceeds with the very same methodology/ies. This impasse harkens back to the performative – inaugurative and ordering – function of the authorial address. More importantly, it points to the transcendental existence of the *idea of methodology* as an epistemic performative, regardless of the efficacy of any

particular methodology. Such a transcendental existence and efficacy of an ordering method is coexistent with the transcendental nature of capitalism, which operates with any set of values – European, American, Asian, regulated, deviant – as well as with any other.

Key to the mercuriality of capitalism is, of course, knowledge as a productive force that creates new forms of accumulation. Suffice it to think of the extent to which the culture of sharing and free software has helped Apple and Microsoft to sell more hardware. Or, the extent to which the widespread interpellation to creativity has made it possible for universities to operate in a debt economy. In cognitive capitalism, the rise of the culture of sharing is concomitant with financial precariousness. Likewise, the rise of the knowledge society is concomitant with the degradation of artists and intellectuals whose work is quantified according to the most reductionist economic criteria – economic criteria being, according to André Gorz (1989) *by definition reductionist*, since economics arose as a form of emancipation from the corruption of religious institutions in the nineteenth century but retained the exact same dogmatic organising principle, divided into three economic 'wholes' that mimic the trinity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost: the production, the reproduction, and the distribution of wealth (1989, p. 112). The knowledge of the artist and the intellectual is, in the twenty-first century, small-changed into minuscule areas of expertise, much like the assembly line worker's actions were, in industrial capitalism and with the aid of Taylorism, reduced to a limited number of mindlessly repetitive actions. This 'optimisation' of knowledge production, which goes hand in hand with the 'scientisation' of life, and its removal from 'the reach of participatory politics' has, as Ashis Nandy (2000) has argued, made educational institutions into the 'depositories of expertise' whose purpose is to 'legitimize the 'expertization' of public affairs and the reign of the professionals' (2000, p. 116). The rise of the 'experts' and the 'professionals' cannot be separated from the extraction of value via the misplaced rhetoric of excellence. Reaching reasonable expectations is no longer enough in any sphere of life. Only exceeding all performance parameters and achieving so-called outstanding results is a guarantee of what is portrayed as a sustainable knowledge economy.

## The Misplaced Rhetoric of Excellence

Excellence – the Greek *arête*, which refers to attaining one's own personal pinnacle – is, without a doubt, a laudable concept that has exercised the minds of many philosophers, from Aristotle and Plato, to Baruch Spinoza and Friedrich Nietzsche. In Homeric poetry, the term was associated with bravery, passion, and personal effectiveness. In Aristotle and Plato, *arête* was allied with knowledge, contemplation, and meta-knowledge. In cognitive capitalism, however, which relies on obsessive ranking and perpetual judgment, excellence bears far more semblance to the Weberian equation of the spirit of capitalism

with the Protestant work ethic, than to bravery, passion, knowledge, or contemplation. In Max Weber's ([1930] 1992) famous paradigm, laid out in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, the Protestant work ethic – answering the call of ‘duty’ – is paired with virtue, as is, indeed, goal-orientated action, and the resulting goal-orientated knowledge production. Virtue is, in turn, inseparable from success, and success is inseparable from the amassment of material attributes that are both quantifiable and cumulative. By tirelessly displaying the fruits of his/her labour in the form of accumulated worldly possessions, the early capitalist, like the Protestant believer, sought to display, and, in this way, *authenticate* predilection – the status of being chosen by her god. At the same time, however, the coveted status of divine predilection manifested in no other way but through the *accumulation* of worldly possessions.

Bearing this particular tautology in mind, it comes as little surprise that, in cognitive capitalism, epistemic ratification continues in the ‘authenticating’ tradition. Suffice it to look at the questions put to artists taking part in the UK REF [Research Excellence Framework] impact studies (studies that valorise practical artistic projects on the basis of their *impact* on their environment, other artists, scholars, and the general public). They take the following form: ‘how many people have you influenced? Please provide evidence in the form of testimonials and/or metrics’. The fact that many of the most influential artists of all times, Franz Kafka or Vincent Van Gogh, for instance, died in obscurity, does not, according to the current hegemonic paradigm, reflect the obvious fact that they were probably more interested in their *work* rather than in authenticating their predilection as ‘knowledgeable literary or painterly experts’, although, clearly, neither Kafka nor van Gogh were forced to account for their productivity through metric measurements. But before we relegate this problem to the movement of big data, programmed to detect pattern and similarity in order to accelerate cumulative, supposedly value-accruing processes, it is worth pondering the early manifestation of the problem, not for historical reasons, but in order to identify possible alternatives.

In his early writing on simulacra, in which he presciently terms the social ‘a total construct [...] constructing its hyperreality from statistics, polls, computer models’, and turning individuals into ‘data’ (2001, p. 22), Jean Baudrillard establishes an important correlation between the rise of industrial capitalism, petit bourgeoisie, and modes of communication. Despite the fact that his emphasis on simulacra is of limited relevance here, the *self-enunciatory, performative working of the sign* is crucially important when read against the Weberian authentication, and the increasingly problematic relationship of knowledge to information. For Baudrillard, hyperreality comes into being through four phases of the image. In the first phase, the image reflects a profound reality; in the second, the image masks this profound reality; in the third, the image masks the absence of a profound reality; in the fourth (the digital phase) the image no longer bears any relation to reality whatsoever (1994, p. 2-6). While the passage from the

first to the second phase is arguably emancipatory, it also creates a problematic relation of emancipatory gestures to their performative working – which inaugurate *as existing* that which they suggest.

In the first phase of the image, which belongs to the pre-industrial period, signs correspond to the factual state of affairs. A blacksmith's professional activity corresponds to the sign outside their shop – a hammer and a chisel. The way people dress corresponds to what is thought to be their ‘station’ in life; peasants dress like peasants, nobility dress like nobility. In the second phase, the phase of industrialisation, characterised by the rapid development of new modes of production, increasingly detached from (what were formerly seen as) ‘natural’ processes, the bourgeoisie and industrial entrepreneurs mark their appurtenance to this class via the *ostentatious possession of objects*. Their behaviour does not reflect an existing reality. On the contrary, it *creates* a new reality through speech, performance, and the use of symbols. Regardless of their ‘station’ at birth, the self-inaugurated bourgeoisie asserts independence in the face of ‘old’ norms and values: the family lineage, upbringing, schooling, and taste. Precisely the same occurs with the upwardly mobile professionals of the 1980s – yuppies – who, mimicking inaugurative gestures, create yet another ‘emancipatory’ sign system where values such as in-depth knowledge of a field acquired through years of study, are replaced with effectiveness, social connected-ness, the general transferability of values, and pure net weight. A similar performative inauguration of status, via the ostentatious amassment of worldly goods that continues in the Weberian vein can be seen in the latest variation on the bourgeois/entrepreneurs/yuppies theme: the netocrats, whose rise to prominence is concomitant with the rise of the ‘experts’, and the burgeoning of the knowledge economy.

## Netocratic Quantification

Alexander Bard and Jan Söderqvist's (2002) *Netocracy* establishes an important relation between the arbitrary production of value (via value-accruing networks), and digital quantification, despite the authors' problematic use of an active-passive polarity, which portrays the consumtariat as non-productive, and fails to take into account that consumers have long become prosumers. However, the value of the book lies in Bard and Söderqvist's lucid explanation of the way in which the netocrats, who create value from pure connected-ness and connectivity (the social and digital conditions necessary for the channeling of information) also create hegemony by imposing on knowledge production the reductionist relation of ostentatious possessions to success. The chief problem here is that, in order to be distributable via the digital networks, knowledge has to be smooth, homogeneous, and easily consumable. It has to be reduced, at least in part, to information, which brings us to the second, and much more serious set of problems.

One may well ask: what is knowledge – in the strong sense of the word – if not a heterogeneous, deeply transformative, temporally intense force that comes into being at the interstice of the past, the present, and the future? (Han 2016, p. 17). As Byung-Chul Han has argued, knowledge differs greatly from the homogeneity of additivity, characteristic of information, which does not require a complex process of transformation to take place, and can, for this reason, be easily recorded, reproduced, and distributed; why it travels much faster than knowledge (p. 17). The problem of the accelerated, smooth, and unhindered passage of knowledge-cum-information, where the emphasis is on distribution, speed, and ‘innovative’ value-creation, is, in many ways, similar to the well-known irrationality of rationality, analysed by George Ritzer a quarter of a century ago in his 1993 book *The McDonaldization of Society*.

Focusing on the fast food industry, but, as the title suggests, implying society at large, Ritzer articulates a particular brand of irrational rationality – a mode of calculation that replaces thinking with a series of means-to-an-end, cost-benefit analyses, whose sole parameters are efficiency, predictability, accelerated value production, and, ultimately, control. In Ritzer’s analysis, McDonald’s not only managed to sell *nutritionally noxious food* at a great profit, far more worryingly, it managed to exercise social control by substituting systematic, self-serving irrationality for rationality. The same principle is evident in the various forms of knowledge quantification, ranking, hegemonically imposed as a *necessity* amidst the tireless semiocapitalist sign re-combination that exhausts ‘mental capacities through information deluge and acceleration’ (Berardi, 2015, p. 68).

What we are left with is the reduction of knowledge to a performative function. In cognitive capitalism, one of the foremost, although not sole purposes of knowledge production is to maintain the *transcendental idea* of knowledge – as a productive force – while ensuring that particular epistemic products conform to the easy presentation in the media, and accelerated consumption. Infelicitously, accelerated consumption is increasingly accompanied by diminished attention, which, in turn, necessitates the production of increasingly simpler bytes to be digested with less and less effort. Information Fatigue syndrome, first reported by David Lewis in 1996, initially affected individuals working with huge quantities of information. Today, IFS affects everyone due to the vertiginous growth of the informational mass. One of its key symptoms is the numbing of analytical capacities. As Han (2015) suggests in *In the Swarm*, arguing against digital smoothness, borne of over-positivity and a lack of negativity that manifests as additivity and accelerated growth: ‘[b]eyond a certain threshold, information no longer informs, it deforms’ (2015, p. 82). Thinking, by contrast, as a form of knowledge production and reception, hinges on ‘distinction and selection’ since ‘[t]hought is always exclusive’ (p. 82). Thought cannot be additive or cumulative precisely because it is *transformative*, because it is internally different, and changes the hitherto existing state of affairs in *every* phase of the process.

At the root of the increasingly palpable epistemic violence is the reduction of knowledge to information, and of information to excessive, yet *deformed* accumulation. Diffuse but nevertheless efficacious, this form of violence operates through several recognisable micro-strategies. The first is epistemic degradation via the withholding of legitimation in case of non-compliance with meaningless quantification (the inability to answer the ‘how many’ and ‘how much’ questions ‘satisfactorily’). The second is expertisation in areas where an overview is needed; for example, outsourcing evaluations of educational institutions to market research specialists, and subsequently treating the specialists’ McDonaldised reports, which, by definition, cannot *not* be McDonaldised due to the methodology they use, as serious data. The third is the universalisation – or reduction to the common denominator – of knowledges that require a particular species of time, a particular brand of concentration, and a specific sensorial engagement, and turning them into ‘transferable’ skills, the general equivalent of any specific skill, imitative of the general equivalent of all (exchange) value, which is money. The fourth is the game-theory notion of achieving results *by other means*, for example, by frantic networking and elaborate advertising in order to produce quantified ‘value’ and, in this way, legitimate mediocre projects.

In the current knowledge economy, artistic knowledge is called upon to solve the accumulated problems of capitalism, such as the climate disaster euphemistically termed ‘climate change’. At the same time, however, artistic knowledge production is increasingly regimented, as well as subsumed under the quasi-emancipatory, but, in reality, McDonaldised ‘accessibility’ paradigm. It is often also violently squeezed into incompatible formats and media, despite the fact that there have also been positive developments in this sphere, such as the sound and the video essay, which has replaced the obligatory written essay. While it goes without saying that there can be no recipe for artistic knowledge production, and/or research, it is worth bearing in mind the Weberian relation of accumulation to authentication, perfected by generation upon generation of the petit bourgeoisie, entrepreneurs, yuppies, and netocrats. In the digital age, the relation of accumulation to authentication has acquired speed and alarming performance efficacy – the ability to inaugurate, and, if fact, *institute that which is suggested as reality*. The problem here, as already mentioned, is not ‘real value’ versus the simulacrum, but the cumulative working of performatively (far too) efficacious gestures, that breed results very different from (any definition of) knowledge: the inability to grasp non-reductionist premises, disinterest, attention deficit, and ignorance.

## Idiosyncrasy as Strategy

What is needed is a decidedly non-homeopathic approach: idiosyncrasy, obscurity, even incomprehensibility. Not as a weak ‘I would rather not’ strategy – to borrow from Herman Melville’s over-exploited, half-



dead anti-hero Bartleby, depicted in his 1853 short story *Bartleby the Scrivener* – but as an active antidote to rampant, *somatically painful* reductionism. An antidote that can re-invigorate perception, rumination, and inspiration by creating indigestible otherness that thwarts and blocks the smoothness of communication, not in the form of an inaugurative gesture – avant-garde manifesto-style – but as a quiet illumination: a persistent, wholehearted, intimate effort in a chosen direction, which has nothing to do with individualism, but with the basic nature of any worthwhile knowledge: irreducibility. As Tengo Kawana, a character from Haruki Murakami's *1Q84* repeats throughout the novel: 'If you can't understand it without an explanation, you can't understand it with an explanation' (Murakami, 2012).

On a less anecdotal note, and pointing to the fact that any type of outsider – for instance, the idiot – has long vanished from society, Han argues that digital networking and communication 'have massively amplified the compulsion to conform' (Han 2017, p. 82). Etymologically, 'idiosyncrasy' refers to a specific mixture of bodily humours as well as to a person's particular perception of the world, based on this specific mixture of humours. Because of its grounded-ness in irreducible bodily specificity, idiosyncrasy presents an obstacle to accelerated, compulsive, coercive communication and the incessant, smooth relaying of information. In the age of increasing epistemic violence, borne of cognitive-capitalist commodification, idiotism amounts to the practice of freedom, as the idiot is 'by nature [...] unallied, un-networked and uninformed' (p. 83). Given that 'heresy' means 'choice', and thus the courage to deviate from orthodoxy, the idiot is, in fact, the contemporary heretic (p. 84). Unlike intelligence, which refers to a confined choice (*inter-legere* means to read between), and, for this reason, remains dependent on the system *within which* it operates, the idiosyncratic, un-allied, uncommunicative approach to knowledge, may, indeed, be the only way out of the enclosure created by the commodification of epistemic value.

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